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The Year of the Spy

by Harry Hansen

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THIS YEAR SHOULD go down in literary chronicles as the year of the spy, for the crafty snooper after diplomatic and military secrets has dominated fiction as never before.

In spite of the fact that the chase after spy thrillers was already hot, the spectacular success of John Le Carre's "The Spy Who Came in from the Cold" surprised the publisher, booksellers, and the author, a British Foreign Office employe who had turned out a few conventional yarns as an avocation. Published by Coward-McCann in cloth in January, 1964, "The Spy" hit the best seller lists at once and remained there the rest of the year, most of the time in first place. Even when it dropped to second or third place somebody seemed to hustle crowds into the stores and it would be back in first place again.

Why this sudden rush to an author comparatively unknown? Those who watch such matters have several explanations.

JOHN LE CARRE—or to be exact, John Daniel Moore Cornwell—was the beneficiary of the finest boost a budding author could wish. Graham Greene spoke up and said this was the best spy story he had ever read. It might take a little sleuthing to discover just why Greene sounded off so confidently, but there is no doubt about the effect. The publisher thinks the use of this single indorsement was a winner. Books indorsed by dozens meet with skepticism. But Graham Greene—that's top drawer indorsement.

There are other reasons. One, that Le Carre profits by the appetite for spy thrillers cultivated successfully by the late Ian Fleming. The other, that a story that touches on Russian chicanery strikes topical interest.

Take Ian Fleming's performance. There's something to ponder. The New American Library tells me that it has printed 17,400,000 paperback copies of 11 Fleming titles, and that the world-wide sale of Fleming's books is estimated at between 25 and 30 million copies. This without benefit of library purchases, for they can't circulate paperbacks usefully. But Fleming also sells in clothbound editions. "On Her Majesty's Secret Service" has sold more than 70,000 in cloth. In August it went into paperback and is already in its fifth printing. "You Only Live Twice" has sold 68,000 clothbound books. Some of the paperbacks, such as "The Spy Who Loved Me," "Thunderball," and "The Moonraker," are in their 15th printings.

The author with this popularity died this year at the peak of his writing ability.

AS FOR JOHN LE CARRE, he has retired to Crete to write. His publisher has just made the 22d printing of his book in cloth, a total of 220,000 copies. "The Spy Who Came in From the Cold" has not yet reached paperback. Dell, which paid a fortune for it, will bring it out in January. Two of Le Carre's earlier stories, published by Walker, have gone into paperback, and New American Library has sold 880,000 copies to date.

Coward-McCann will have his next book. It hopes Le Carre is working on it. It has a fetching title, "The Looking Glass War," and will deal with espionage. That's all anybody knows about it, for when the title was concocted, the author had not written a line.

Why do such stories sell? Why did the Sherlock Holmes stories sell? Everybody loves a good suspenseful yarn. Even Presidents — Woodrow Wilson made J. S. Fletcher, John F. Kennedy gave a boost to Fleming's James Bond. The FBI has become the CIA, Scotland Yard has become the Foreign Office, the Surete Generale has become the Deuxieme Bureau. The manhunt is still the most entertaining plot.